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AN OLD MAUMA'S FOLK-LORE.

THE old negro "mauma" of the plantation life of the South is fast becoming a thing of the past. Once she was a familiar figure and a person of great importance. Second in authority only to the white mistress, skilled in all domestic duties, full of superstition, the minstrel of family history and tradition, energetic and accustomed to rule, she was at once the comfort of master and mistress, the terror of idle servants, and the delight of the children of the household. To these last she dispensed, without fear or favor, sweets and switchings, stories and scoldings, as their conduct merited.

I deem myself fortunate in having had one of these old women for my second mother, nurse, and friend from earliest childhood. She is living yet. How old she is no one knows, but she must be nearly or quite a centenarian. In a letter from a package, yellow with age, written by my father and mother before their marriage, she is mentioned as "Old Maum' Sue, who will live with us, but who is becoming too feeble to be of much assistance." The writers of these letters have passed away, leaving children who are no longer children, yet Maum' Sue survives. Bent, withered like an apple nipped by frost, and sorely crippled by rheumatism, her eyes are still bright, and her lips as ready as ever to tell of the old days of bondage, the passing of which she laments as much as the most unreconstructed slaveholder.

Maum' Sue being exceedingly superstitious, it occurred to me on a recent visit to the old homestead in lower South Carolina that some of her odd notions and practices might prove, if recorded, of general interest, especially since the young science of folk-lore is claiming everywhere so many devotees. She was plainly flattered by the mention of the subject. It delighted her to think that one so humble as she could say anything which would interest the ladies and gentlemen of the great North, of which she has only the very vaguest ideas. So willing was she, indeed, to "talk for publication," that the supply of material drawn from her rich store and poured out at my feet proved rather embarrassing from its very abundance. The following beliefs and customs must therefore be regarded only as specimens selected at random from this mine of ancient lore, and not, by any means, as a complete exhibit of its riches.

Most of the low-country negroes of the older generation believe firmly in witches, or hags. These are women who get out of their skins, assume various shapes, and go about to ride people in their beds, causing convulsions in children and nightmare in men. Their unwelcome visits may be prevented by sleeping with an open Bible

beneath the head, by suspending from the neck a bit of asafoetida, or by wearing a necklace of alligator's teeth. Maum' Sue relates and has full faith in the following story, which many readers will recognize as a variant of the one put into the mouth of Daddy Jack by Joel Chandler Harris ("Nights with Uncle Remus," pp. 162-163) :—

My young missus been gwine to school in town [Charleston,— Maum' Sue having spent her youth on James Island] to a lady dat wuz a hag. One night her an' er husban' been sleepin' een de baid, an' de 'ooman git up, leabe 'er skin, an' go out to ride people. Her husban' e lookin', an' soon ez she go e call fer de salt an' pepper, an' e salt de skin same lak 'e salt hog-meat. Atter while 'e see de hag een de moonlight comin' t'roo de crack lookin' raw. She come to de skin an' say t'ree time, 'Skin, you no know me?' Den she staht fer git een it, but she cahn't kaze it been salted, an' de salt sting. So she run behin' de do'; an' nex' mawnin' de man call all de people een town, an' w'en dey see 'er dey tek an' put'er een a pen an' bu'n 'er.

Since she was old enough to rock a cradle, the nursing of children has claimed a large share of Maum' Sue's energies, and among her superstitions are many relating to the care of infants. Nothing could induce her to permit a child to be carried down hill on its first journey from home, for this would give it bad luck for life. She is careful, too, to impress upon young mothers the fact that when a baby is taken from home its nurse should always call, "Come, spirit! Come, spirit!" before closing the door. The baby is sure to be fretful while away if its spirit is left behind. When a nurse has been so careless as to hold a baby out of a window or permit it to see itself in a mirror, thus rendering its teething difficult and painful, Maum' Sue does not think of calling in a physician; the child is relieved by tying around its neck a string of alligator's teeth, or by rubbing its gums with the ear of a rabbit. An ill-tempered child who cries all the time she treats heroically, holding it in the rain for several minutes. She cures thrush by suspending from the neck of the afflicted child a bag containing nine live wood-lice, and chicken-pox by putting the patient backwards into a fowl-house. Thrush and ringworm may also be cured by the touch of a posthumous son.

Maum' Sue enjoys a wide reputation for skill in the treatment of corns and warts. To remove a corn she rubs it with a grain of corn, which is then thrown to the oldest fowl in the yard, and she believes that the callosity will disappear as surely as the grain does. She removes warts by tying in a bit of string as many knots as there are warts, and burying it where the water will drip upon it from the eaves of the house. Sometimes she directs a patient to rub each wart with a pea, and then, unobserved by any one, to bury the peas in the garden; or to rub the warts with grains of corn, which are afterwards wrapped in a neat package and placed in the road. It is

thought that the warts will be transferred to the hands of the person who is so unfortunate as to find the package.

Those who are to occupy a new house, this old creature says, may insure good luck to themselves by throwing salt into all the corners before any furniture is moved in. When she sees the new moon she always makes a low courtesy and says three times, "Howdy, Mos' Moon;" and she considers herself lucky if she happens to have anything in her hand at the time, for this will bring plenty until the next new moon. Jack-o'-Lantern is a torch borne by the spirit of an old man, and any one foolhardy enough to desire a closer acquaintance with it may compel its approach by sticking a knife-blade into the ground. The cries of screech-owls, and the falling of dead trees when the wind is not blowing, are omens of death. One may tell how many of one's friends are to die soon, by counting the stars within a lunar halo. Visitors should always be careful to go out through the same door at which they went in, otherwise some misfortune will befall them. Many a dusky milkmaid has drawn upon herself the wrath of Maum' Sue by spilling milk upon the ground or into the fire, because she believes that such carelessness makes the cows go dry.

The Society for Psychical Research might gain some information by interviewing Maum' Sue on the subjects of dreams and ghosts. None of her dreams are without significance; they are either warnings given for wrongdoing in the past, or omens of future events. Persons who see ghosts, she assures me, possess this power by virtue of having been born, like horses and dogs, with putty in their eyes. Although she herself has seen spirits, there are some items of popular negro ghost-lore concerning which she is skeptical. "Dey tells me," she says, "dat w'en a pusson dies de sperit rides on de coffin to de grabe, an' den come bahk an' stan' t'ree days behin' de do'; but, gentermen, I don' see how dat kin be." Still, when death claims a member of any household with which she is intimate, she is careful to see that all cups, pans, and buckets are emptied after the funeral, because she thinks that the spirit will remain on the premises if encouraged by free access to food and water.

The ancient lore of which the instances here cited form a part is losing its hold upon the minds of men. Some portion of it falls into oblivion every time one of the old negroes like Maum' Sue dies. The younger generation, with their schoolbooks, churches, and newspapers, regard it only as a sort of harmless lunacy in their elders, and not as what it really is,—the surviving fragments of earnest theories formulated in more primitive times to explain the mystery of existence.

John Hawkins.

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